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ABSTRACT

A two-level training program was developed to help preschool teachers in Singapore upgrade their English teaching skills. At the first level, a core group of 20 teachers and 20 supervisors were trained in preparation, presentation, and participation stages. In the preparation stage, participants learned basic teaching skills required to foster the development of verbal fluency and listening skills among preschool children. In the presentation stage, teachers and supervisors implemented what they had learned in their own centers and classes. In the participation stage, participants learned how to write a lesson plan and worked in teams on a group project on curriculum development. At the second level of training, supervisors conducted workshops for teachers from their own centers or organizations. A total of 126 teachers were trained in these workshops on basic skills. Feedback about the training was positive. Supervisors indicated that they had benefitted from the workshops. Classroom observations indicated a marked improvement in children's verbal ability in English, particularly in listening skills. Assessment of children's listening and oral communication skills indicated that children who received instruction at level two outperformed level one and control group children. (RH)

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UPGRADING PRE-SCHOOL TEACHERS' TEACHING SKILLS THROUGH CENTRE-BASED INTERVENTION

- by Ko Peng Sim, Institute of Education, Singapore

Education of young children has recently become a hot topic in Singapore. More and more parents have turned to professionals for advice on child-rearing and education of their young. There is a growing concern from both public and private sectors about the quality and physical conditions of Singapore pre-schools; and a strong move to upgrade the facilities of these schools.

The same concern was felt by staff of IE (Institute of Education), the only teacher training institute in Singapore. Currently, those who opt to teach in pre-schools are not required to go through a compulsory pre-service training course, as their counterparts in primary schools do. Some of the pre-school teachers, however, have attended the Basic PPLP (Pre-primary and Lower primary) course offered by IE. A few have subsequently completed the Intermediate and Advanced courses. In addition to its regular teaching training programmes, IE is also very much involved in research, in particular, in applying research findings to teacher training. The IE-BvLF Project* is one such example. It started with a research study on the cognitive and social development of pre-school children, and then made use of the research findings to decide on the focus of its training programmes.

The IE-BvLF Project was conceptualised with the belief that children could be helped to develop their potentials provided appropriate guidance and timely help were given. In order to determine what help was needed and

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what form of help would be appropriate for our pre-schoolers and their teachers, we spent two years collecting baseline data. Between 1984 and 1986, some 3000 children from 40 local pre-schools and day-care centres were individually interviewed, observed, and tested on 26 tasks, covering four broad areas: language (English and a second language, namely, Chinese, Malay, or Tamil), mathematics, general cognitive abilities and social behaviour. Total time spent on each child was approximately 3½ hours, which was spread over a period of 3-4 weeks. While data collected provided valuable information concerning the various aspects of the growth of Singapore pre-schoolers, we were particularly concerned about two observations. We found that many children were weak in English, especially in listening comprehension and verbal fluency; and that most of the teachers who taught them were not trained to teach the subject. These would have important implications to teacher training as a lack of English competency would make a child "disadvantaged" in schools where English would be used as the main teaching media. The problem was confounded by the fact that children who were weak in English came mainly from non-English spoken homes. Whether the English teacher could teach well would therefore be of particular importance.

In order to help pre-school teachers to upgrade their teaching skills, we began to look for effective ways of teaching pre-school English. Two feasibility studies were conducted towards the end of 1986. The results showed that children learned best in an environment which provided them ample opportunities to participate in classroom activities, and time to interact with their peers. There was also strong indication that teacher control was necassry for children at this young age.

The immediate question was: how many teachers could IE train and whom should be trained first. Following a meeting with officers in charge

of the various pre-school operating organisations, it was decided that priority should be given to teachers who showed potential to be good teachers but not the weaker ones, as the latter would need more time to develop. Senior pre-school staff such as centre supervisors could be given the responsibility with support from IE.

A training programme with a two-level training procedure was drawn and implemented with effect from July 1987. According to this special programme, Project staff from IE would first train a core group of teachers and supervisors. The supervisor participants, upon completion of each stage of training*, would conduct similar workshops for teachers from their own centres or organisations.

Appendix 1 gives an overview of the programmes offered. The term "IE-based workshops" and "centre-based workshops" were used to differentiate the two levels of training. IE-based workshops were those conducted by IE staff at IE campus. Centre-based workshops were those conducted by supervisor participants for teachers in their own centres and organisations.

IE-based Workshops (July 1987 to May 1989)

The IE-based workshops were attended by 20 teachers and 20 supervisors. They were nominated to attend the workshops by their respective organisations.

Training was conducted in three stages:

- a Preparation Stage (July to November 1987) which aimed at providing participants with basic teaching skills required to foster the development of verbal fluency and listening skills in pre-school children;

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* IE training was conducted in three stages: a preparation stage, a presentation stage, and a participation stage, each has a special focus.

- a Presentation Stage (January to May 1988) which allowed participants to try out what they learned from the workshops in their own centres and classes. This was the consodilation period for teacher participants and also time for supervisor participants to conduct centre-based workshops.
- a Participation Stage (July 1988 to May 1989) during which participants first learned how to write a lesson plan, and then worked as a team in a group project on curriculum development. In this exercise, participants not only prepared the lessons, but also learned to select, compile, and produce teaching aids and instructional materials relevant to a selected theme.

During the Preparation Stage, workshops were conducted at IE for both teacher and supervisor participants. The 3-hour weekly workshops provided both groups of participants with an intensive training of basic teachiing skills. No formal workshops were held in the first three months of the Presentation Stage. They were replaced by monthly meetings at IE during which teachers and supervisors shared their experience and problems with fellow participants. New ideas were also brought up for discussion. More IE workshops were held in April and May 1989 to orientate participants to the fundamentals of lesson planning. New topics such as assessment and evaluation were introduced to the participants, and step-by-step guidance on how to develop a termly programme provided particpants with the necessary knowledge and experience to engage in their group project.

Centre-based Workshops (January 1988 to May 1989)

The first series of centre-based workshops were conducted between January and May 1988. A total of 126 teachers were trained by the supervisor participants during this period. Training was offered

collectively or individually, according to the number of teachers involved. These workshops concentrated on basic teaching skills. As the supervisor participants had just completed a 5-month training at IE, these centre-based workshops not only allowed them to consolidate what they learned from the workshops, but also enabled them to share their knowledge and experience with more teachers. As the centre-based workshops were attended by teachers from same centres or organisations, the supervisors were able to tailor the content of the training to the needs of individual centres.

Some supervisor participants experienced difficulties in the organisation and conduct of centre-based workshops. Time constraint, lack of fund, oral proficiency of teachers, and supervisors' lack of teaching experience, were the main problems. Part of the problems were solved by the supervisors and their workshop participants. IE trainers also visited the workshops to offer on-site support.

The experience gathered in the first series of centre-based workshops helped to improve the running of the second series, held between January and May 1989. By then it was realised that format of workshops would have to be adjusted for some of the centres. In some cases, centralised training were recommended to form a bigger pool of teachers to be trained together.

Teachers participated in the centre-based workshops also contributed to the group project of their supervisors'. This further strengthened the bond between the supervisors and teachers under their charge. The relation between the two parties became close because of collaborative effort and team work.

Feedback and Evaluation

Feedback on IE and centre-based training were gathered from various sources, including

1. reports from workshop leaders
2. questionnaire to workshop participants
3. classroom observation
4. assessment of children's performance in an English test

Results were as follows:

Reports from Workshop Leaders

All workshop participants were monitored by staff from IE. The workshop leaders, who were responsible for the IE-based training, also paid regular visits to workshop participants at their centres during the "trying out" period. Through their observation and interaction with these teachers, they were able to report on the teachers' performance.

In general, feedback was very positive. Teachers were found to be more confident after attending the workshops. Their verbal expression had improved. They were seen to use teaching aids more often then they did at the initial stage of training. Some teachers were creative as shown in the way they used or made their teaching aids. There was certainly more interaction in the classroom when they applied what they learned from the workshops in teaching English lessons.

Teachers were happy about the training especially because provisions were made for them to discuss and share ideas and experience with fellow participants. Many said that they had benefited most from hands-on

experience, and found the experience of making their own teaching aids very rewarding.

Some teachers, however, were not able to carry out their plans. This was either due to time constraint (as they had to complete the schools' syllabus first), or lack of support from their immediate bosses.

Views of workshop participants

A written questionnaire was administered to both supervisor and teacher participants at the end of the training, i.e., May 1989. Both focused on the participants' perception and experience about the training, with slight difference in the question asked.

Thirteen supervisors and 12 teachers responded by sending back completed questionnaire. Following were their views:

From the supervisors:

All supervisor participants indicated that they had benefited from attending the IE-based workshops. The supervisors who were not involved in teaching, in particular, were happy that they had gone through an intensive course on how to teach English. They were now more confident than they were before when talking to the teachers. By conducting centre-based workshops, they also learned how to interact with teachers under their charge.

Lesson planning and making of teaching aids were found to be most relevant to their work as supervisors. Six of the supervisors said so. Assessment and evaluation, techniques of story telling, use of puppets, and skills in conducting workshops, were also high on the list of relevance.

On the question of whether teachers gained from attending the centre-based workshops, the answer was a Yes from all supervisor participants. Teachers were now more confident and motivated, they said. More activities were being introduced, and teaching aids such as big books and puppets were frequently used, too.

Time constraint again was the main problem identified. Teachers' English competency, too, made training rather difficult.

There was a general observation that children taught by teacher participants in both IE and centre-based workshops did better in an English test as compared to the control group children whose teachers were not involved in the training. Why was it so? The workshop participants were asked. The most probable reason for these children's good progress, the workshop participants believed, was that learning had now become more interesting with stories, rhymes, puppets, and dramatisation. Because children were given more opportunity to interact with one another, and were encouraged to speak up, they were exposed more to the language than they were previously, hence the progress was fast.

From the teachers

All 12 teachers who responded to the questionnaire said they had benefited from attending the IE-based workshops. Half of them said they learned useful skills and teaching techniques. Three teachers felt that they were now more confident about teaching English, and three others were happy to discover that they learned to speak better English.

Teachers were most satisfied with the practical workshops as they learned to tell stories, make puppets and other teaching aids. These helped them to make their lessons more interesting to the children.

The making and use of big books were found to be most relevant to their

work as teachers by 7 teacher participants. Other relevant activities were: making and use of puppets, songs and rhymes, lesson planning, and game-like activities.

Although some of the teacher participants had completed the basic skills training at IE, most felt that they now had more insight into the use and making of puppets, big books, and other teaching aids. They had now realised the importance of lessono planning, and found that there were actually many ways of telling stories.

When asked whether they were able to apply what they learned from IE workshops in their teaching, all said Yes. But not all teachers were able to try out the "trial lessons" during the consolidation period. Thoses who could not do it said it was because they had school syllabus to cover hence did not have enough time to do the extra lessons.

All teachers indicated that they shared what they learned from IE workshops with teachers in their own schools. Sharing of ideas and experience, and sharing of teaching aids were most frequent. Some teachers planned their lessons together with their colleagues, and shared with them their instructional materials.

Teachers were particularly happy that children had become more responsive in the class. They enjoyed activities especially when puppets were used. They loved to listen to stories, and was excited when asked to role-play. The active participation of children in classroom activities, they felt, was good for children as they interacted more with their peers and teacher, and hence learned to speak English.

Classroom Observation

This was done by a group of research assistants whose duties were to

record faithfully children's reaction to teachers' instruction and the language they used when interacting with their peers.

All research assistants were individually trained by experienced IE staff. A special observation schedule was drawn for each research assistant. It gave the names of children to be observed, the sequence of observation, and format for recording the observations. Five children from each class were identified as subject for observation, and each child was observed once a week by the same research assistant. Altogether, 244 children were observed.

While data collected are being analysed, the observers reported that there was a marked improvement in children's verbal ability in English. The greatest improvement seen was the children's listening skills. Over 70% of the children being observed were able to follow oral directions in English, and majority had little difficulty repeating stories, poems, rhymes, and songs. Very few were able to do these when they were first observed.

There was also marked improvement in clarity of children's expression of ideas. About half of the children observed were able to use the English words meaningfully, and over 60% of the children conversed in English most of the time to their English teachers, an improvement of 30% over what they were a year before.

Assessment of children's performance

An English test was developed for this purpose. The test, which consisted of 7 sub-tests, focused on listening and oral communicative skills.

The sub-tests were:

interview (verbal fluency)

listening commands

word knowledge

listening comprehension

record of oral language

picture narrative

picture talk

These tests were administered to three groups of children: children taught by teachers who were trained by IE staff in IE workshops, children whose teachers participated in centre-based workshops, and children whose teachers were not involved in the training. The break-down of children tested were as follows:

Table 1 Number of Children Taking the English Test

Test Occasion	Control Group	Experimental Group 2	Experimental Group 3
1st	81	404	399
2nd	120	273	424

Note. Experimental Group 2 refers to children whose teachers participated in IE-based workshops.

Experimental Group 3 refers to children whose teachers participated in centre-based workshops.

Control Group refers to children whose teachers were not involved in the training.

The two tests were one-year apart. Same tests were used in the two test occasions.

Tables 2-5 summarise children's performance in five of the seven sub-tests.

Table 2 Children's Performance in the Word Knowledge Test

Group	Mean Score (sd)		Gain in Mean Scores	t value
	1st test	2nd test		
Control	58.00 (23.49)	59.55 (22.24)	1.55	0.48
Experimental Group 2	48.43 (22.78)	59.69 (20.72)	11.26	6.71**
Experimental Group 3	51.68 (23.64)	60.64 (20.33)	8.96	5.84**

Note. Total number of items = 84
Maximum score = 84
** = significant at the 1% level

Table 3 Children's Performance in the Listening Comprehension Test

Group	Mean Score (sd)		Gains in Mean Scores	t value
	1st test	2nd test		
Control	9.27 (2.26)	9.43 (2.20)	0.16	0.48
Experimental Group 2	7.87 (2.72)	9.45 (2.35)	1.58	7.70**
Experimental Group 3	8.42 (2.46)	9.73 (2.47)	1.31	7.63**

Note. Total number of items = 12
Total maximum score = 12
** = significant at the 1% level

Table 4 Children's Performance in the Verbal Fluency Test

Group	Mean Level of Competency (sd)		Gains in Level of Competency	t value
	1st test	2nd test		
Control	2.64 (0.76)	2.77 (0.88)	0.13	1.04
Experimental Group 2	2.39 (0.88)	2.42 (0.89)	0.03	0.33
Experimental Group 3	2.45 (0.86)	2.83 (0.89)	0.38	6.29**

Note. Level of competency is from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest)
** = significant at the 1% level

Table 5 Children's Performance in the Picture Narrative Test

Group	Mean Level of Competence (sd)		Gains in Level of Competency	t value
	1st test	2nd test		
Control	2.80 (0.88)	2.83 (0.89)	0.03	0.28
Experimental Group 2	2.63 (0.95)	2.91 (0.96)	0.28	3.56**
Experimental Group 3	2.69 (0.88)	3.24 (0.98)	0.55	8.35**

Note. Level of Competency is from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest)
** = significant at the 1% level

Table 6 Children's Performance in the Picture Talk Test

Group	Mean Level of Competence (sd)		Gains in Level of Competence	t value
	1st test	2nd test		
Control	2.80 (0.80)	2.83 (0.83)	0.03	0.28
Experimental Group 2	2.57 (0.91)	2.65 (0.97)	0.08	1.05
Experimental Group 3	2.60 (0.87)	3.05 (0.99)	0.45	6.81**

Note. Level of Competence is from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest)
** = significant at the 1% level

It was very clear from the figures that children in the experimental groups were doing well in the English test and making good progress. In all cases the control group children started with higher test scores but in just one year, the experimental groups not only caught up with the control group but in fact had overtaken the latter in test performance.

In the verbal fluency, picture narrative and picture talk tests, progress made by experimental groups were impressive. Group 3, in particular, were the top performers in all three tests. Group 2 children had fallen behind in verbal fluency and picture talk, but their performance in the picture narrative test was actually better than that of the control group.

What could have contributed to the big jump in test scores of experimental group? Effective teaching, skills in story telling, opportunities for child participation, open atmosphere in the classroom, were identified by participants as some of the contributing factors. The growing confidence of teachers, their sense of responsibility and eagerness to upgrade themselves, all combined to become a motivation force for teachers to do well.

To conclude, results of the training confirmed our belief that children could be helped to develop their potential provided appropriate guidance was given (in this case it was the learning of English); and that teacher control was important for pre-school learning.

The most encouraging results, perhaps, was the progress made by Group 3 children. It showed that training could be most effective when tailored to the needs of teachers and demands of individual pre-school centres. With the success of centre-based workshops and the skillful training role played by supervisor participants, the study showed that teacher training would have more effect if it was accompanied by intervention at the centre's level.

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Appendix 1

Schedule of IE-BvLF Project Phase 2 Training Workshops

Period	Focus	Supervisors	Teachers
Jul-Nov 87 Preparation Stage	Basic skills training in language arts activities designed to promote oral communicative skills in English	IE workshops 18 sessions Total 54 hrs	IE workshops 18 sessions Total 54 hrs
Jan-May 88 Presentation Stage	Teaching the language arts programme	Centre-based workshops IE workshops 3 sessions Total 9 hrs	Trying out in own centre IE workshops 10 sessions Total 30 hrs
Jul-Nov 88 Participation Stage	Lesson plans: development and implementation	IE workshops 10 sessions Total 30 hrs Discussion & micro-teaching	IE workshops 10 sessions Total 30 hrs Discussion & micro-teaching
Jan-Mar 89 Participation Stage (cont.)	Developing new ideas and teaching methods Implementation of themetic lesson plans in class	centre-based workshops IE workshops 3 sessions Total 9 hrs	trying out in own centre IE workshops 3 sessions Total 9 hrs
Apr-May 89 Preparation Stage (cont.)	Group project: developing a pre-school programme/curriculum	IE workshops 7 sessions Total 21 hrs	IE workshops 7 sessions Total 21 hrs
Jul-Aug 89 Production Stage (optional)	Production of materials for use in the class	IE workshops practical work Centre-based workshops Practical work	IE workshops practical work